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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: REPERCUSSIONS OF SEPTEMBER 21

MURDERS

REF: BANGKOK 6051

Classified By: Political Counselor Susan M. Sutton. Reason 1.4
(b, d)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: The September 21 murders of two Marines who were being held hostage at a Muslim village in Narathiwat province continue to dominate the headlines. The Thaksin administration has been restrained in its initial response but has vowed to take decisive measure against the culprits. The government's tough rhetoric reflects widespread public outrage over the killings. The Royal Family has treated the two soldiers as "heroes," according them honors normally reserved for senior members of Thai society. The murders -- reminiscent of past mob violence in the South -- happened during a highly symbolic period and are another significant milestone in the far South. END SUMMARY

GOVERNMENT VOWS TOUGH RESPONSE

¶12. (SBU) The September 21 brutal murders of two Thai Marines, who were being held hostage in a rural village in Narathiwat province (reftel A), continue to reverberate throughout Thailand. News of the killing has dominated print and television coverage. Prime Minister Thaksin, using strong language, has vowed repeatedly to hunt down those responsible, saying the Marines "will not die in vain." The government's response, as of yet, has been restrained. The military has surrounded the village where the killings took place and has arrested four suspects. The MFA issued a statement that portrays the incident as another attempt by separatist militants to "internationalize the situation" in the far South.

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE VILLAGE?

¶13. (SBU) The RTG is portraying the incident as being deliberately planned. Military leaders described a small core group of agitators supported by a larger group of some 50 male supporters who seized the pair. These groups were then protected by the several hundred villagers -- mostly women and children -- who blocked the access of security forces into the village.

¶14. (C) Mark Tamthai, a civilian advisor to the NSC and member of the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) was at the village during the standoff. Tamthai told us that the military's account of a loosely organized crowd was correct but opined that the incident "could not have happened spontaneously." Dr. Panitan Wattanayagom, an expert on southern Thailand from Chulalongkorn University, said that high ranking members of the military told him that the incident was deliberate, noting that the gas tank in the two soldiers' car had been tampered with so that they could not escape from the village.

¶15. (C) Tamthai described a chaotic scene at the village and confused government response -- with no clear leadership on the ground -- reminiscent of the October 25, 2004 Tak Bai incident. Narathiwat Governor Pracha Taerat, on the scene initially, was called away due to the arrival in Narathiwat of Crown Princess Sirinthorn. Tamthai reported that Major General Phicet Wisaijorn, Deputy 4th Army area commander (and former military academy classmate of PM Thaksin) was on the scene, but did not appear to be in charge of the situation.

WIDESPREAD OUTRAGE OVER THE MURDERS

¶16. (C) The popular reaction in Thailand over the brutal killings should not be understated. In Bangkok, "man on the street" conversations are filled with angry rhetoric and calls for retaliation against "ungrateful Muslims." On popular Thai language websites, chat postings have been filled with strong language calling for repressive measures, or violence, against Muslims. Tamthai speculated that widespread anger among the larger Thai populace would make it very hard for the government to not respond forcefully to the incident.

¶17. (C) The murders are also an emotional issue for Muslims in the South. Tamthai said Muslims see the widespread media

coverage and outcry over the murders as another example of the general population's bias against them. Tamthai described the attitude as "they never care when a Muslim is killed, but when a Buddhist is killed there is a huge amount of attention paid." Tamthai speculated that incident would be "very divisive" between the communities.

TEST FOR THE NRC

18. (C) During and after the incident the NRC, and its Chairman Anand Panyarachun, have been surprisingly silent. Dr. Panitan told poloffs that any hope for a non-violent response will depend on Anand, but noted that significantly Anand had not come forward publicly to urge restraint. Panitan opined that the NRC's credibility will be negatively affected unless Anand can do something to calm the situation down. Mark Tamthai, himself a prominent NRC member, told poloffs he is worried that the situation is a serious set back for reconciliation efforts, and said he was "disheartened" by the series of events.

ROYAL ATTENTION TO THE MURDERS SENDS STRONG PUBLIC SIGNAL

19. (C) On September 22, Princess Sirinthorn, the most highly revered member of the royal family besides the King, personally presided for a royal water ceremony over the remains of the two murdered soldiers at a Buddhist temple in Narathiwat. The ceremony was broadcast live nationwide on all major channels. Individual wreaths from the King, Queen, Crown Prince and other members of the royal family were also presented at the temple. The Crown Princess also announced that she would pay for a house and scholarships for family members of the slain Marines.

CONCERN ABOUT "RETALIATION"

10. (C) PM Thaksin has vowed to treat the culprits "with an iron fist in a velvet glove," leading to widespread speculation among local observers that security forces will be given even wider latitude to target suspected militants. Gothom Arya, a prominent human rights leader and also an NRC member, told poloffs that he is very concerned that this incident would lead to the military being given the "shoot to kill" order on Muslims suspected of involvement in the insurgency. Dr. Panitan also speculated that the incident would lead to retribution from security forces. Panitan, who often consults with the Thai military and Royal Family on the South, said that he had spoken with senior military leaders and had been told that the Marines "will have their revenge." Panitan said that he had urged that the Marines be pulled out of the region and replaced with units not emotionally involved in the latest incident.

11. (C) This latest incident could reinforce the already serious estrangement between the ethnically Malay Muslim population of the far South and the central government. Dr. Panitan is concerned that the government's response and overall "simplistic" strategy towards the South are having the affect of driving a disparate Muslim community together. Panitan also noted that the government tended to collectively blame and punish southern Muslims, reinforcing the "us versus them" mentality in the South.

POOR TIMING FOR LATEST INCIDENT

12. (C) The timing of the hostage taking/murders could not have been worse. We are approaching Ramadan, and the October 25 anniversary of the Tak Bai tragedy. The killings themselves took place during the period when the Queen is supposed to begin her annual stay in Narathiwat. (NOTE: The Queen was originally scheduled to arrive to arrive in Narathiwat on September 12, but postponed her visit because of severe back problems which were clearly evident in a recent public ceremony. Embassy sources say she will travel to Narathiwat on September 26. END NOTE)

A PATTERN OF CROWD VIOLENCE?

13. (C) This incident appears to follow earlier instances of apparent manipulated crowd violence seen in the South. In April, 2003 -- also in Narathiwat's Ra Nage district -- two Border Patrol officers were surrounded by a large crowd of villagers after rumors spread that the pair were "ninjas," responsible for recent deaths in the area. After a period of negotiations where officials failed to win their release, the two policemen were beaten to death. Eyewitness accounts of the Tak Bai incident also describe how rumors were used to gather and agitate a crowd while a core group of young male instigators worked to direct the crowd's anger. Given the general level of fear and paranoia in the South it is easy to see how a small group of organized militants could create these scenarios.

COMMENT: ANOTHER BAD MILESTONE IN THE SOUTH

¶14. (C) The September 21 murders is another significant milestone in the situation in southern Thailand. Senior officials in the NSC told polcouns and visiting EAP/MLS Director that the RTG is aware that this incident was a "trap" meant to provoke a reaction and attract international attention. Despite their awareness of the "trap," and initial restraint, the RTG's likely response will be to do exactly what the militants want -- a divisive, harsh crackdown.

¶15. (C) COMMENT CONT. The participation of Princess Sirinthorn in the bathing ceremony is highly symbolic act, and sends a strong signal to the public. Normally, a member of the royal family will only preside over such a ceremony for a very high ranking person or someone who has performed distinguished service for the Thai state. The ceremony's many strong symbols -- especially pictures of the Princess anointing the bodies while surrounded by Thai flags -- will not be missed by average Thais. The fact that the ceremony took place in a Buddhist temple -- located in the middle of an overwhelmingly Muslim province -- sends a very different message to the majority ethnically Malay Muslims who call Narathiwat their home. There was no royal ceremony for the two Muslims killed the night before the two Marines were killed; and no royal scholarships were given to their families. The Princess's extraordinary role underscores the tremendous public outrage over the incidents which will certainly further polarized the Buddhist and Muslim communities. END COMMENT
BOYCE